

MESSAGE TO AN ALIEN

I

Dalton tossed the scorched, plastic encased diagram on the Territorial Governor's wide, not recently polished desk. The man seated there prodded the document with a stylus as if to see if there were any life left in it. He was a plump little man with a wide, brown, soft-leather face finely subdivided by a maze of hairline wrinkles.

"Well, what's this supposed to be?" He had a brisk, no-nonsense voice, a voice that said it had places to go and things to do. He pushed out his lips and blinked up at the tall man leaning on his desk. Dalton swung a chair around and sat down.

"I closed up shop early today, Governor," he said, "and took a little run out past Dropoff and the Washboard. Just taking the air, not headed anywhere. About fifty miles west I picked up a radac pulse, a high one, coming in fast from off-planet."

The Governor frowned. "There's been no off-world traffic cleared into the port since the Three-Planet shuttle last Wednesday, Dalton. You must have been mistaken. You—"

"This one didn't bother with a clearance. He was headed for the desert, well away from any of the settlements."

"How do you know?"

"I tracked him. He saw me and tried some evasive maneuvers, too close to the ground. He hit pretty hard."

"Good God, man! How many people were aboard? Were they killed?"

"No people were killed, Governor."

"I understood you to say—"

"Just the pilot," Dalton went on. "It was a Hukk scout-boat."

Several expressions hovered over the Governor's mobile face; he picked amused disbelief.

"I see: you've been drinking. Or possibly this is your idea of hearty frontier humor."

"I took that off him." Dalton nodded at the plastic covered paper on which a looping pattern of pale blue lines was drawn. "It's a chart of the Island. Being amphibious, the Hukk don't place quite the same importance on the interface between land and water as we do; they trace the contour lines right down past the shore line, map sea bottoms and all. Still, you can pick out the outline easily enough."

"So?"

"The spot marked with the pink circle was what he was interested in. He

crumped in about ten miles short of it."

"What the devil would a Hukk be looking for out there?" the Governor said in a voice from which all the snap had drained.

"He was making a last-minute confirmation check on a landing site."

"A landing site—for what?"

"Maybe I should have said beachhead."

"What kind of nonsense is this, Dalton? A beachhead?"

"Nothing elaborate. Just a small Commando-type operation, about a hundred troops, light armor, hand weapons, limited objectives—"

"Dalton, what is this?" the official exploded. "It's only been seven years since we beat the Hukk into the ground! They know better than to start anything now!"

Dalton turned the chart over. There were complex characters scrawled in columns across it.

"What am I supposed to make of this—this Chinese laundry list?" the Governor snapped.

"It's a brief of a Hukk Order of Battle. Handwritten notes, probably jotted down by the pilot, against regulations."

"Are you suggesting the Hukk are planning an invasion?"

"The advance party is due in about nine hours," Dalton said. "The main force—about five thousand troops, heavy equipment—is standing by off-planet, waiting to see how it goes."

"This is fantastic! Invasions don't happen like this! Just . . . just out of a clear sky!"

"You expect them to wait for a formal invitation?"

"How—how do you pretend to know all this?"

"It's all there. The scout was a fairly high-ranking intelligence officer. He may even have planned the operation."

The Governor gave an indignant grunt, then pursed his lips, pushing his brows together. "See here, if this fellow you intercepted doesn't report back—"

"His report went out right on schedule."

"You said he was killed!"

"I used his comm gear to send the prearranged signal. Just a minimike pulse on the Hukk LOS freke."

"You warned them off?"

Dalton shook his head. "I gave them the all-clear. They're on the way here now, full gate and warheads primed."

The Governor grabbed up his stylus and threw it at the desk. It bounced high and clattered across the floor.

"Get out of here, Dalton! You've had your fun! I could have you thrown into prison for this! If you imagine I have nothing better to do than listen to the psychotic imaginings of a broken-down social misfit—"

"If you'd like to send someone out to check," Dalton cut in, "they'll find the Hukk scout-boat right where I left it."

The Governor sat with his mouth open, eyes glued to Dalton.

"You're out of your mind. Even if you did find a wrecked boat—and I'm not conceding you did—how would you know how to make sense of their pothooks?"

"I learned quite a bit about the Hukk at the Command and Staff school."

"At the Com—" the Governor barked a laugh. "Oh, certainly, the Admiralty opens up the Utter Top Secret C&S school to tourists on alternate Thursdays. You took two weeks off from your junk business to drop over and absorb what it takes a trained expert two years to learn."

"Three years," Dalton said. "And that was before I was in the junk business."

The Governor looked Dalton up and down with sudden uncertainty. "Are you hinting that you're a . . . a retired admiral, or something of the sort?"

"Not exactly an admiral," Dalton said. "And not exactly retired."

"Eh?"

"I was invited to resign—during the Hukk treaty debates."

The Governor looked blank, then startled.

"You're not . . . that Dalton?"

"If I am—you'll concede I might know the Hukk hand-script?"

The Governor rammed himself bolt upright.

"Why, I have a good mind to—" he broke off. "Dalton, as soon as word gets around who you are, you're finished here! There's not a man on Grassroots who'd do business with a convicted traitor!"

"The charge was insubordination, Governor."

"I remember the scandal well enough! You fought the treaty, went around making speeches undermining public confidence in the Admiralty that had just saved their necks from a Hukk takeover! Oh, I remember you, all right! Hard-line Dalton! Going to grind the beaten foe down under the booted heel! One of those ex-soldier-turned-rabble-rousers!"

"Which leaves us with the matter of a Hukk force nine hours out of Grassroots."

"Bah, I . . ." The Governor paused, twisting in his chair. "My God, man, are you sure of this?" He muttered the words from the corner of his mouth, as if trying to avoid hearing them.

Dalton nodded.

"All right," the Governor said, reaching for the screen. "Subject to a check, of course, I'll accept your story. I'll notify CDT HQ at Croanie. If this is what you say it is, it's a gross breach of the treaty—"

"What can Croanie do? The official Love Thine Enemy line ties their hands. A public acknowledgment of a treaty violation by the Hukk would discredit the whole Softline party—including some of the top Admiralty brass and half the major candidates in the upcoming elections. They won't move—even if they had anything to move with, and could get it here in time."

"What are you getting at?"

"It's up to us to stop them, Governor."

"Us—stop an armed force of trained soldiers? That's Admiralty business, Dalton!"

"Maybe—but it's our planet. We have guns and men who know how to use them."

"There are other methods than armed force for handling such matters, Dalton! A few words in the right quarter—"

"The Hukk deal in actions. Seven years ago they tried and missed. Now they're moving a new pawn out onto the board. That makes it our move."

"Well—suppose they do land a small party in the desert, perhaps they're carrying out some sort of scientific mission, perhaps they don't even realize the world is occupied. After all, there are less than half a million colonists here . . ."

Dalton was smiling a little. "Do you believe that, Governor?"

"No, damn it! But it could be that way!"

"You're playing with words, Marston. The Hukk aren't wasting time talking."

"And your idea is . . . is to confront them—"

"Confront, Hell," Dalton growled. "I want a hundred militiamen who know how to handle a gun: the blast rifles locked up in the local armory will do. We'll pick our spots and be waiting for them when they land."

"You mean—ambush them?"

"You could call it that," Dalton said indifferently.

"Well . . ." The Governor looked grave. "I could point out to the council that in view of the nature of this provocative and illegal act on the part of—"

"Sure." Dalton cut off the speech. "I'll supply transport from my yard, there's an old ore tug that will do the job. You can make it legal later. Right now I need an authorization to inspect the armory."

"Well . . ." Frowning, the Governor spoke a few words into the dictypen, snatched the slip of paper as it popped from the slot, signed it with a slash of the stylus.

"Have the men alerted to report to the arms depot at twenty-two hundred hours," Dalton said as he tucked the chit away. "In field uniform, ready to move out."

"Don't start getting too big for your breeches yet, Dalton!" the Governor barked. "None of this is official, you're still just the local junk man as far as I'm concerned."

"While you're at it, you'd better sign a commission for me as a lieutenant of militia, Governor. We may have a guardhouse lawyer in the bunch."

"Rather a comedown for a former commodore, isn't it?" Marston said with a slight lift of the lip. "I think we'll skip that. You'd better just sit tight until the council acts."

"Twenty-two hundred, Governor," Dalton said. "That's cutting it fine. And tell them to eat a good dinner. It may be a long wait for breakfast."

II

The Federation Post Office was a blank gray five story front of local granite, the biggest and ugliest building in the territorial capital. Dalton went in along a well-lit corridor lined with half glass doors, went through the one lettered Terran Space Arm, and below, in smaller letters, GSgt Brunt—Recruiting Officer. Behind the immaculate counter decorated with colorful posters of clear-eyed young models in smart uniforms, a thick-necked man of medium height and age, with a tanned face and close-cropped sandy hair looked up from the bare desk with an expression of cheerful determination that underwent an invisible change to wary alertness as his eyes flicked over his caller.

"Good morning, Sergeant," Dalton said. "I understand you hold the keys to the weapons storage shack north of town."

Brunt thought that over, nodded once. His khakis were starched and creased to a knife-edge. A Combat Crew badge glinted red and gold over his left shirt pocket.

Dalton handed over the slip of paper the Governor had signed. Brunt read it, frowned faintly, read it again, folded it and tapped it on the desk.

"What's it all about, Dalton?" He had a rough-edged voice.

"For now that has to be between the Governor and me, Brunt."

Brunt snapped a finger at the note. "I'd like to oblige the Governor," he said. "But the weapons storage facility is a security area. No civilians allowed in, Dalton." He tossed the note across the desk.

Dalton nodded. "I should have thought of that," he said. "Excuse the interruption."

"Just a minute," Brunt said sharply as Dalton turned away. "If you'd like to tell me what's behind this . . ."

"Then you might stretch a regulation, eh? No thanks, Sergeant. I couldn't ask you to do that."

As Dalton left, Brunt was reaching for his desk screen.

III

Dalton lived a mile from town in a small pre-fab at the side of a twenty-acre tract covered with surplus military equipment, used mining rigs, salvaged transport units from crawlers to pogos. He parked his car behind the house and walked back between the looming hulks of gutted lighters, stripped shuttle craft ten years obsolete, wrecked private haulers, to a big, use-scarred cargo carrier. He started it up, maneuvered it around to the service ramp at the back, spent ten minutes checking it over. In the house, he ate a hasty meal, packed more food in a carton, changed clothes. He strapped on a well-worn service pistol, pulled on a deck jacket. He cranked up the cargo hauler, steered it out to the highway. It was a ten minute drive past the two-factory heavy industry belt, past scattered truck-gardens, on another three miles into the pink chalk, ravine-sliced countryside. The weapons depot was a ribbed-metal Quonset perched on a rise of ground to the left of the road. Dalton turned off, pulled to a stop and waited for the dust to settle before stepping down from the high cab.

There was a heavy combination lock on the front door. It took Dalton ten minutes with a heavy-duty cutter to open it. Inside the long, narrow building, he switched on an unshielded overhead light. There was a patina of dust over the weapons racked in lock-frames along the walls.

Another three minutes with the cutter had the lock-bars off the racks. The weapons were 2mm Norges, wartime issue, in fair shape. The charge indicators registered nil.

There was a charging unit against the end wall, minus the energy coil. Dalton went out to the big vehicle, opened the access hatch, lifted out the heavy power unit, lugged it inside, used cables to jump it to the charger.

It took him an hour and thirty-eight minutes to put a full charge on each of one hundred and two weapons. It was twenty-one thirty when he put through a call on the vehicle's talker to the Office of the Governor. The answering circuit informed him that the office was closed. He tried the Gubernatorial residence, was advised that the Governor was away on official business. As he switched off, a small blue-painted copter with an Admiralty eagle and the letters FRS on the side settled in beside him. The hatch popped open and Brunt emerged, crisp in his khakis. He stood, fists on hips, looking up at the hauler's cab.

"All right, Dalton," he called. "Game's over. You can haul that clanker back to the yard. Nobody's coming—and you're not going anywhere."

"I take it that's a message from his Excellency the Governor?" Dalton said.

Brunt's eye strayed past the big vehicle to the shed door, marred by a gaping hole where the lock had been.

"What the—" Brunt's hand went to his hip, came up gripping a palm-gun.

"Drop it," Dalton said.

Brunt froze. "Dalton, you're already in plenty of trouble—"

"The gun, Brunt."

Brunt tossed the small gun to the ground. Dalton climbed down, his pistol in his hand.

"The Council said no, eh?"

"What did you expect, you damned fool? You want to start a war?"

"No—I want to finish one." Dalton jerked his head. "Inside." Brunt preceded him into the hut, at Dalton's direction gathered up half a dozen weapons, touching only the short, thick barrels. He carried them out and stowed them in the rear of the hauler.

Dalton ordered Brunt into the cab, climbed up beside him. As he did, Brunt aimed a punch at his head; Dalton blocked it and caught his wrist.

"I've got thirty pounds and the reach on you, Sergeant," he said. "Just sit quietly. Under the circumstances I'm glad you happened along." He punched the door-lock key, started up, lifted onto the air-cushion and headed west into the desert.

IV

Dusk was trailing purple veils across the sky when Dalton pulled the carrier in under a wind-carved wing of violet chalk at the base of a jagged rock-wall and cut power. Brunt grumbled but complied when Dalton ordered him out of his seat.

"You've got a little scramble ahead, Sergeant." Dalton glanced up the craggy slope looming above.

"You could have picked an easier way to go off your rails," the recruiter said. "Suppose I say I won't go?"

Dalton smiled faintly, doubled his right fist and rotated it against his left palm. Brunt spat.

"If I hadn't been two years in a lousy desk job, I'd take you, Dalton, reach or no reach."

"Pick up the guns, Brunt."

It took Dalton most of an hour to place the five extra blast rifles in widely-spaced positions around the crater's half mile rim, propping them firmly, aimed at the center of the rock-strewn natural arena below. Brunt laughed at him.

"The old Fort Zinderneuf game, eh? But you don't have any corpses to man the ramparts."

"Over there, Brunt—where I can keep an eye on you." Dalton settled himself behind a shielding growth of salt weed, sighting along the barrel of the blast rifle. Brunt watched with a sour smile.

"You really hate these fellows, don't you, Dalton? You were out to get them with the treaty, and failed, and now you're going to even it all up, single-handed."

"Not quite single-handed. There are two of us."

"You can kidnap me at gun-point, Dalton, and you can bring me out here. But you can't make me fight."

"That's right."

Brunt made a disgusted sound. "You crazy fool! You'll get us both killed!"

"I'm glad you concede the possibility that this isn't just a party of picnickers we're here to meet."

"What do you expect, if you open fire on them?"

"I expect them to shoot back."

"Can you blame them?" Brunt retorted.

Dalton shook his head. "That doesn't mean I have to let them get away with it."

"You know, Dalton, at the time of your court-martial, I wondered about a few things. Maybe I even had a few doubts about the treaty myself. But this . . ." He waved a hand that took in the black desert, the luminous horizon, the sky. "This confirms everything they threw at you. You're a paranoiac—"

"But I can still read Hukk cursive," Dalton said. He pointed overhead. A flickering point of pink light was barely visible against the violet sky.

"I think you know a Hukk drive when you see one," Dalton said. "Now let's watch and see whether it's stuffed eggs or blast cannon they brought along."

V

"It doesn't make sense," Brunt growled. "We've shown them we can whip them in war, we gave them generous peace terms, let them keep their space capability almost intact, even offered them economic aid—"

"While we scrapped the fighting ships that we didn't build until ten years of

Hukk raids forced us to."

"I know the Hardline, Dalton. OK, you told 'em so. Maybe there was something in it. But what good is this caper supposed to do? You want to be a martyr, is that it? And I'm the witness . . ."

"Not quite. The Hukk picked this spot because it's well-shielded from casual observation, close enough to Grassport and Bedrock to launch a quick strike, but not so close as to be stumbled over. That's sound, as far as it goes, but as a defensive position, it couldn't be worse. Of course, they didn't expect to have to defend it."

"Look, Dalton, OK, you were right, the Hukk are making an unauthorized landing on Grassroots' soil. Maybe they're even an armed party, as you said. Swell. I came out here with you, I've seen the ship, and I'll so testify. So why louse it up? We'll hand the file to the CDT and let them handle it! It's their baby, not yours! Not mine! We've got no call to get ourselves blasted to Kingdom Come playing One-Man Task Force!"

"You think Croanie will move in fast and slap 'em down?"

"Well—it might take some time—"

"Meanwhile the Hukk will have brought in their heavy stuff. They'll entrench half a mile under the surface and then start spreading out. By the time the Admiralty gets into the act, they'll hold half the planet."

"All right! Is that fatal? We'll negotiate, arrange for the release of Terry nationals, the return of Terry property—"

"Compromise, in other words."

"All right, you give a little, you get a little!"

"And the next time?"

"What next time?"

"The Hukk will take half of Grassroots with no more expense than a little time at a conference table. That will look pretty good to them. A lot better than an all-fronts war. Why gulp, when you can nibble?"

"If they keep pushing, we'd slap them down, you know that."

"Sure we will—in time. Why not do it now?"

"Don't talk like a damned fool, Dalton! What can one man do?"

The Hukk ship was visibly lower now, drifting down silently on the stuttering column of light that was its lift-beam. It was dull black, bottle-shaped, with a long ogee curve to the truncated prow.

"If I had any heavy stuff up here, I'd go for her landing jacks," Dalton said. "But a 2mm Norge doesn't pack enough wallop to be sure of crippling her. And if I miss, they're warned: they can lift and cook us with an ion bath. So we'll wait until they're off-loaded, then pour it into the port. That's a weak

spot on a Hukk ship. The iris is fragile, and any malfunction there means no seal, ergo no lift. Then we settle down to picking them off, officers first. With fast footwork, we should have them trimmed down to manageable size before they can organize a counterattack."

"What if I don't go along with this harebrained suicide scheme?"

"Then I'll have to wire your wrists and ankles."

"And if you're killed, where does that leave me?"

"Better make up your mind."

"Suppose I shoot at you instead of them?"

"In that case I'd have to kill you."

"You're pretty sure of yourself, Dalton." When Dalton didn't answer Brunt licked his lips and said: "I'll go this far: I'll help you burn the port, because if you foul it up it's my neck too. But as for shooting fish in a barrel—negative, Dalton."

"I'll settle for that."

"But afterward, once she's grounded—all bets are off."

"Tell that to the Hukk," Dalton said.

VI

"Lousy light for this work," Brunt said over his gun-sights. Dalton, watching the Hukk ship settle in almost soundlessly in a roil of dust, didn't answer. Suddenly, floodlights flared around the base of the ship, bathing it in a reflected violet glow as, with a grating of rock, the Hukk vessel came to rest.

"Looks like a stage all set up for Swan Lake," Brunt muttered.

For five minutes, nothing happened. Then the circular exit valve dilated, spilling a widening shaft of green light out in a long path across the crater floor, casting black shadows behind the thickly scattered boulders. A tiny silhouette moved in the aperture, jumped down, a long-legged shadow matching its movement as it stepped aside. Another followed, and more, until seven Hukk stood outside the ship. They were slope-backed quadrupeds, hunched, neckless, long faced, knob jointed, pendulous bellied, leathery hided. A cluster of sheathed digital members lay on either side of the slab-like cheeks.

"Ugly bastards," Brunt said. "But that's got nothing to do with it, of course."

Now more troops were emerging, falling in in orderly rows. At a command faintly audible to Dalton as a squeaky bark, the first squad of ten Hukk about-faced and marched fifty feet from the ship, halted, opened ranks.

"Real parade ground types," Brunt said. "Kit inspection, no less."

"What's the matter, Sergeant? Annoyed they didn't hit the beach with all guns blazing?"

"Dalton, it's not too late to change your mind."

"I'm afraid it is—by about six years."

The disembarkation proceeded with promptness and dispatch. It was less than ten minutes before nine groups of ten Hukk had formed up, each with an officer in charge. At a sharp command, they wheeled smartly, executed a complicated maneuver which produced a single hollow square two Hukk deep around the baggage stacked at the center.

"All right, Brunt, off-loading complete," Dalton said. "Commence firing on the port."

The deep chuff! chuff! of the blast rifles echoed back from the far side of the crater as the two guns opened up. Brilliant flashes winked against the ship. The Hukk stood fast, with the exception of two of the officers who whirled and ran for the ship. Dalton switched sights momentarily, dropped the first one, then the second, returned to the primary target.

Now the square broke suddenly, but not in random fashion; each side peeled away as a unit, spread out, hit the dirt, each Hukk scrambling for shelter, while the four remaining officers took up their positions in the centers of their respective companies. In seconds, the dispersed troops were virtually invisible. Here and there the blink and pop! of return fire crackled from behind a boulder or a gully.

The port was glowing cherry red; the iris seemed to be jammed half closed. Dalton shifted targets, settled the cross hairs on an officer, fired, switched to another as the first fell. He killed three before the remaining Hukk brasshat scuttled for the protection of a ridge of rock. Without a pause, Dalton turned his fire on the soldiers scattered across the open ground.

"Stop, you bloodthirsty fool!" Brunt was yelling. "The ship's crippled, the officers are dead! The poor devils are helpless down there—"

There was a violet flash from near the ship, a deep-toned warhoom!, a crashing fall of rock twenty feet to their left. A second flash, a second report, more rock exploded, closer.

"Time to go," Dalton snapped and, without waiting to see Brunt's reaction, slid down the backslope, scrambled along it while rock chips burst from the ridge above him amid the smashing impacts of the Hukk power cannon. He surfaced two hundreds yards to the left of his original position, found the rifle emplacement. He aimed the weapon, depressed the trigger and set the hold-down for automatic rapid fire, paused long enough to fire half a dozen aimed bolts at the enemy, then moved on to the next gun to repeat the operation.

VII

Twenty minutes later Dalton, halfway around the crater from his original location, paused for a breather, listening to the steady crackle of the Hukk

return fire, badly aimed but intense enough to encourage him to keep his head down. As well as he could judge, he had so far accounted for eight Hukk in addition to the five officers. Of the five blast rifles he had left firing on automatic, two had been knocked out or had exhausted their charges. The other three were still firing steadily, kicking pits in the bare rock below.

A few of the ship's ground-lights were still on; the rest had been shot out by the Hukk soldiery. By their glow Dalton picked an exposed target near the ship, brought his rifle to bear on him. He was about to pull the trigger when he saw Brunt sliding downslope thirty degrees around the perimeter of the ringwall from him, waving an improvised white flag.

VIII

The words from the Hukk PA system were loud and clear if somewhat echoic, and were delivered in excellent Terran, marred only by the characteristic Hukk difficulty with nasals:

"Terran warrior." The deep, booming voice rolled across the crater. ". . . orrior, rier. Hwe hno hnow that you are alone. You have fought hwel. Hnow you must surrender or be destroyed."

The lone Hukk officer stood in an exposed position near the center of the semicircular dispersement of soldiers, holding the end of a rope which was attached to Brunt's neck.

"Unless you show yourself at once," the amplified voice boomed out, "you hwil be hunted out and killed."

The Hukk officer turned to Brunt. A moment later Brunt's hoarse voice echoed across the crater:

"For God's sake, Dalton, they're giving you a chance! Throw down your gun and surrender!"

Sweat trickled down across Dalton's face. He wiped it away, cupped his hands beside his mouth and shouted in the Hukk language:

"Release the prisoner first."

There was a pause. "You offer an exchange, himself for yourself?"

"That's right."

Another pause. "Very well, I accept," the Hukk called. "Come forward now. I assure you safe-conduct."

Dalton lifted his pistol from its holster, tucked it inside his belt, under the jacket. He studied the ground below, then worked his way fifty feet to the right before he stood, the blast gun in his hands, and started down the slope along the route he had selected, amid a rattle of dislodged rock fragments.

"Throw down your weapon!" the PA ordered as he reached the crater floor. Dalton hesitated, then tossed the gun aside. Empty-handed, he advanced among the boulders toward the waiting Hukk. The captain—Dalton was

close enough to see his rank badges now—had pulled Brunt in front of him. The latter, aware of his role as a human shield, looked pale and damp. His mouth twitched as though there were things it wanted to say, but was having trouble finding words equal to the occasion.

When Dalton was twenty feet from the officer, passing between two six-foot-high splinters of upended rock, he halted abruptly. At once, the captain barked an order. There was a flicker of motion to Dalton's left. He darted a hand under his jacket, came out with the pistol, fired, and was facing the officer again as a yapping wail came from the target.

"Tell your troops to down guns and pull back," Dalton said crisply.

"You call on me to surrender?" The officer was carefully keeping his members in Brunt's shadow.

"You've been had, Captain. Only three of your soldiers can bear on me here—and they have to expose themselves to fire. My reaction time is somewhat quicker than theirs; you see the result."

"You bluff—"

"The gun in my hand will penetrate two inches of flint steel," Dalton said. "The man in front of you is a lot softer than armor."

"You would kill the man for whose freedom you offered your life?"

"What do you think?"

"My men will surely kill you!"

"Probably. But you won't be here to transmit the all-clear to the boys standing by off-planet."

"Then what do you hope to gain, Man?"

"Dalton's the name, Captain."

"That name is known to me. I am Ch'oova. I was with the Grand Armada at Van Doom's world."

"The Grand Armada fought well—but not quite well enough."

"True, Commodore. Perhaps our strategy has been at fault." The captain raised his head, barked an order. Hukk soldiers began rising from concealment, gun muzzles pointing at the ground; they cantered away toward the ship by twos and threes, their small hooves raising cottony puffs of dust.

When they were alone, Captain Ch'oova tossed the rope aside.

"I think," he said, with a small, formal curtsey, "that we had best negotiate."

IX

"That fellow Ch'oova told me something funny," Brunt said as the cargo

carrier plowed toward the dawn. "Seven years ago, at Van Doom's world, you were left in command of the Fleet after Admiral Hayle was hit. You were the one who fought the Grand Armada to a standstill."

"I took over from Hayle, yes."

"And won the battle. Funny, that part didn't get in the papers. But not so funny, maybe, at that. According to Ch'oova, after the fighting was over, you refused a direct Admiralty order."

"Garbled transmission," Dalton said.

"Tempers run high in wartime," Brunt said. "The Hukk had made a lot of enemies before we finally faced up to going to war. The High Command wanted a permanent solution. They gave you secret orders to accept the Hukk surrender, and then blow them out of space. You said no."

"Not really; I just didn't get around to carrying out the order."

"And in a few days, cooler heads prevailed. But not before you were relieved and posted to the boondocks, and your part in the victory covered up."

"Just a routine transfer," Dalton said.

"And then, by God, you turn around—you, the white-haired boy who'd saved the brass from making a blunder that would have ruined them when it got known—and went after the treaty hammer and tongs, to toughen it up! First you save the Hukks' necks—and then you break yourself trying to tighten the screws on them!"

Dalton shook his head. "Nope; I just didn't want to mislead them."

"You wanted their Armada broken up, occupation of their principal worlds, arms limitations with inspections—"

"Brunt, this night's work cost the lives of fourteen Hukk soldiers, most of them probably ordinary citizens who were drafted and sent out here all full of patriotic fervor. That was a dirty trick."

"What's that got to do—"

"We beat them once. Then we picked 'em up, dusted 'em off, and gave them back their boys. That wasn't fair to a straightforward bunch of opportunists like the Hukk. It was an open invitation to blunder again. And unless they were slapped down quick, they'd keep on blundering in deeper—until they goaded us into building another fleet. And this time, there might not be enough pieces left to pick up."

Brunt sat staring thoughtfully out at the paling sky ahead; he laughed shortly. "When you went steaming out there with fire in your eye, I thought you were out for revenge on the Hukk for losing you your fat career. But you were just delivering a message."

"In simple terms that they could understand," Dalton said.

"You're a strange man, Commodore. For the second time, single-handed, you've stopped a war. And because you agreed with Ch'oova to keep the whole thing confidential, no one will ever know. Result: You'll be a laughingstock for your false alarm. And with your identity known, you're washed up in the junk business. Hell, Marston will have the police waiting to pick you up for everything from arms theft to spitting on the sidewalk! And you can't say a word in your own defense."

"It'll blow over."

"I could whisper a word in Marston's ear—"

"No you won't, Brunt. And if you do, I'll call you a liar. I gave Ch'oova my word; if this caper became public knowledge, it would kick the Hukk out of every Terran market they've built up in the past six years."

"Looks like you've boxed yourself into a corner, Commodore," Brunt said softly.

"That's twice you've called me Commodore—Major."

Brunt made a surprised sound. Dalton gave him a one-sided smile.

"I can spot a hotshot Intelligence type at half a mile. I used to wonder why they posted you out here."

"To keep an eye on you, Commodore, what else?"

"Me?"

"A man like you is an enigma. You had the brass worried. You didn't hew to any party line. But I think you've gotten the message across now—and not just to the Hukk."

Dalton grunted.

"So I think I can assure you that you won't need to look for a new place to start up your junk yard. I think the Navy needs you. It'll take some string pulling, but it can be swung. Maybe not as a commodore—not for a while—but at least you'll have a deck under your feet. How does it sound?"

"I'll think about it," Dalton said.